THE MESSAGE OF THE STARS
February 7, 2010

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
NAPLES, FL

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

John 1:1–5, 14
Genesis 1:1–13, 24–25

“The heavens are telling the glory of God.”
Psalm 19:1 (NRSV)

“I don’t believe in God, but I miss him.” That is how the distinguished American author Julian Barnes begins his, widely acclaimed book, *Nothing to Be Afraid Of*. Barnes is not hostile toward religion; he simply does not have any. “I don’t believe in God, but I miss him,” he says (*New York Times Book Review*, 5 October 2008).

His book is one of a recent series of best sellers arguing that there is no God; that atheism is the rational, scientific, realistic position; and that religion, based on belief in the existence of God, is a delusion. Furthermore, the authors argue, religion is guilty of much of the evil that has beset humankind: intolerance, bigotry, racism, violence, persecution, wars. That critique is not without merit. Religion has done all those things and somewhere in the world is doing those things this morning. No one knows that more profoundly than people who believe in God, practice their religion, love God, and try to love their neighbors. But it also needs to be said that the most determined and sustained opposition to

bigotry, racism, sexism, and all the rest of it has come historically from religion and religious communities, churches and synagogues.

Religion has opposed scientific inquiry, but most of the institutions of higher learning, which includes science, were established by people of faith and churches. Religion has been co-opted to justify slavery, but it was also religion, the black church, that spawned the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King Jr. was first and foremost a Christian minister.

Atheists, in the meantime, are newly assertive, arguing in books, editorials and TV talk shows that there is no God and religion is a dangerous

delusion. Popular TV host Bill Maher mocks religion and gets a lot of laughs by finding the most bizarre expressions of religion, sets them up, knocks them down with such ease. Advertisements on 800 British buses announce, "There's Probably No God. Now Stop Worrying and Enjoy Your Life."

The bestselling authors Christopher Hitchens (in *The Portable Atheist*), Richard Dawkins (in *The God Delusion*), Sam Harris (in *The End of Faith*), and distinguished thinkers before them—H. L. Mencken, Bertrand Russell, Robert Ingersoll, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx—argue that human reason, the human intellect, science, is all we can ultimately rely on, that you cannot

prove the existence of God so, therefore, God does not exist.

The first page of the Bible does not present a list of arguments for the existence of God but contains a statement of faith, a creed. In a narrative that is not science but beautiful poetry, it makes claims that are the bedrock of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

God is the creator of all that is: not one of many superhuman deities attached to a tribe, an altar, a temple, vying for supremacy and attention, but the God who created everything that is. An important point the ancient poem makes is that God doesn't use available raw materials to create: there is nothing

before God, creation is out of nothing—*ex nihilo* the old theologians called it. Before anything is, God is. And when God begins to speak, to express, say a word, things start to happen. Time begins, space begins: light in the darkness, day and night, sun and moon, earth and sky—and then comes life, the magnificent parade of living plants, fish, creatures that swim and fly and crawl and walk.

This is not science, biology, or history, and to try to force it to become science or history, as fundamentalists do, is to misuse it and to miss the point—which is that there is a God who is before everything else is, who calls into being everything that has being, a God

in whom you and I and everything else lives and moves and has being.

Can you prove it? Of course not. Can you disprove it? No. Hans Küng, one of our greatest thinkers, in a new book, *The Beginning of All Things: Science and Religion*, observes that if you can't prove the existence of God, neither can you prove the nonexistence. "Atheism too," he observes, "lives by undemonstrated faith."

At its best, religion welcomes science as a partner in the search for truth. Copernicus, the Polish astronomer who first proposed that the sun, not the earth, is the center of the solar system, and Galileo, who refined the ideas after observing the movement of the planets,

believed that what they were doing in their scientific research was deepening human knowledge of God. The more we know about the world and how things work, the more we know about the creator.

“The heavens are telling the glory of God,” the psalmist wrote. You can see and know something of the nature and character of the creator by looking at the creation. Sitting around campfires and looking up in wonder millennia ago, peering through the Hubble telescope deep into the blackness of space, or lying on your back at the beach watching for meteors—human beings have forever been drawn out of themselves and into the realm of

mystery and the unknown in the simple act of looking at the world, the creation.

Cosmic accident or the will and intent of a creator? Atheism believes the former; faith, the latter.

At the center of the conflict between science and religion (and by now I hope I am persuading you that there is no conflict) is the figure of Charles Darwin. Based on his observations made during the five-year exploratory voyage of the *HMS Beagle,* Darwin proposed that life has evolved from simple to complex forms over a very long time. He knew how unsettling his ideas would be, and he anticipated and responded to religious objections. He never stopped believing in God, that

God was the creator, continued to worship in his parish church all his life, and is buried in Westminster Abbey. What he saw and analyzed scientifically made him more, not less, reverent. Literalists attack Darwin and evolution as contrary to the Bible. But is the notion of evolution, a process over millions of years, any less amazing and magnificent and beautiful than the idea of creation in six days a few thousand years ago? Not for me.

Darwin wrote in his diary in 1832 about the view from an Andean peak, "When we reached the crest and looked backward: a glorious view, the atmosphere so resplendently clear, the sky an intense blue, the profound valleys, the quiet mountain of snow. . . .

It was like hearing in full orchestra a chorus of the Messiah" (Krista Tippett, *Speaking of Faith*, pp. 77, 78).

Krista Tippett, creator and host of the popular NPR program *Speaking of Faith,* says that there are two ways of knowing and they are represented by science and religion. They are not opposed. They are complementary. Neither is adequate without the other. Albert Einstein said that decades ago: "Religion without science is blind; science without religion is lame."

Tippett learned that when she interviewed John Polkinghorne, distinguished mathematical physicist and an Anglican priest, author of many scholarly articles and books on science

and religion. Polkinghorne is too sophisticated a scientist for the scientists to ignore or dismiss him, and he says simply (or not so simply, actually), “Standard physical causation cannot adequately describe the manifold ways in which things and people interact.” I think that means that there is more to reality than you can get into a test tube or describe in a formula.

Polkinghorne does not propose that God can be proved, but he does argue that belief in God makes more sense of the world and of human experience than does atheism.

Among his reasons for believing in God:

- **The intelligibility of the universe**

- **The anthropic finite tuning of the universe, which he illustrates by quoting Freeman Dyson: “The more I examine the universe and its architecture the more evidence I find that the universe, in some sense, must have known we were coming.”**

- **There are two ways of knowing, Professor Polkinghorne asserts: “A scientist could take a beautiful painting, could analyze every scrap of paint on the canvas, tell you what its chemical composition was, would incidentally destroy the painting, but would have missed the point.**

The chemical composition of the paint is an accurate piece of information, but it is not alone adequate. In fact it quite misses the essence of the painting, the beauty and truth of it."
(Interview with Krista Tippett, *Speaking of Faith*, American Public Media, 29 May 2008)

So with creation: science knows truth, but it's only part of the reality, the truth. Equally relevant is "The heavens are telling the glory of God."

"In the beginning when God created the earth, the earth was without form and void. . . . And God said, 'Let there be light' and there was light."

In the fullness of time, we Christians believe, that original word—that primal, creative, and creating word "Let there be light"—was spoken again by God in ways that words and ideas, creeds and textbooks and sermons—surely sermons—only partially describe. What makes us Christians is the faith that

in the beginning was the Word,
in him all things came into being,
in him was life, and
the light shines in darkness and is never, ever overcome

Those are faith words, deeply Christian words, the same words with which the Bible begins, and the most profound and beautifully Christian of them all are these:

The Word—that primal, creating word—became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus, Jesus the Christ, is his name.

Poetry, art, music say for us what we cannot find words big enough to say. Did you notice how often music comes up?

Charles Darwin, 180 years ago, looking out from a mountain peak and thinking about the Hallelujah Chorus.

Julian Barnes, in his sad atheism confessing "I miss God," misses the purpose behind Mozart's *Requiem,* misses the God that inspired Italian

painting, French stained glass, and German music.

Hans Küng, the great theologian, in his very rigorous, dense book about religion and science says that if you want to understand "Let there be light," don't turn to physics but to Franz Joseph Haydn's *Creation*, "with the surprising fortissimo change in the whole orchestra from dark E minor into radiant, triumphant C Major."

And so it is that sometimes, looking in wonder at the stars or singing a great hymn or hearing magnificent music, I think we most know God and experience God and believe in God.

Johann Sebastian Bach's *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor* is one of the most glorious pieces of music ever written, a miracle. Someone told me once that when Bach wrote the striking, unforgettable opening notes Bach was thinking about John 1, "In the beginning was the Word."

The Word that created
The Word that was God
The Word that became flesh

Unable to bring this to a satisfactory conclusion, I asked for help. So now our most Christian faith, our most profound confession, our deepest prayer:

"In the beginning was the Word."

Dr. Brice Gerlach, Director of Music Ministries, then played J. S. Bach's Toccata from the **Toccata and Fugue in D Minor*.***